Herbert M. Ernst

"How I Came to the JCA/SeniorNet Computer Learning Center and on to the Internet"

As a junior in college majoring in physics with a minor in math, I saw advertised on a Summer Jobs bulletin board that jobs were available based on passing a Federal Service Entrance Exam. I passed the hardest exam ever took up to then and was offered an appointment as a junior scientist at the National Bureau of Standards (NBS) in Washington DC the following summer. Working with some of the greatest scientists in the world in the capital city of the greatest country in the world was an offer this nineteen-year old could not refuse.

Reappointed to a permanent career position on graduation with a BS in Physics, I soon met colleagues who were engineers inventing and building 'a computer' just across Van Ness Street from where I was investigating radioactive isotopes. As soon as I heard of machines able to expand the mental abilities of people, as mechanical machines had always assisted our physical powers, I was hooked.

Stationed at the Signal Corps laboratory in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey for most of my two-year army service I was able to take classes, including the basics of computer engineering where I learned how very large numbers of very simple logical electronic circuits were put together to process information, like using Lego blocks to build any imaginable physical structure.

Thirty-plus years later, retired from Federal service, after managing the Computer and Computer Sciences Division at the David Taylor Naval R&D Center in Carderock, Maryland, with all but thesis approval towards MS and PhD degrees in EE (Computers) from University of Maryland, and ten additional years contracting for Navy and Marine Corps as a software engineer with a small consulting firm, I volunteered to tutor students at all levels in math, physics, and whatever else they needed at the UDC on the former NBS grounds!

At about the same time I met a very lively gentleman in his early eighties who wanted me to teach him all about computers so we could go into consulting business together - he knew all about finance, stocks, etc. I started collecting very small portable computers and planning how to teach him and others like him - a possible new career for both of us.

Fate intervened, as he became ill and had to enter a nursing home, expecting to recover and as interested as ever in learning, but losing strength until the end.

A couple of years later I noticed a small item in our local free Senior Beacon that a JCA-sponsored SeniorNet Computer learning Center had opened at Mazza Gallerie on Wisconsin Avenue in DC! Clearly a match made in heaven for me.

A few months passed until I found myself doing some personal business across the street from Mazza Gallerie with spare time, so I visited the third-floor learning center, just in time to meet Selig Starr about to close for the day.

A day or two later I met with Instruction Coordinator, Joe Schneider, and I've been volunteering in all sorts of capacities for over five-and-a-half years.

Soon Micki Gordon of JCA will be opening a Learning Center at UDC, so I will split my time to help there as well.

At the Mazza center we had AOL on a couple of machines and phone line for getting on line. As I had been fascinated with these 'brain machines' almost forty years earlier, now the thought of being in contact with up to ten million people around the world was sheer excitement. Going on line was then not so simple nor yet very popular. Our equipment was slow, connections unreliable. Being charged by the clock disillusioned a lot of naive users when they saw their sometimes astronomical monthly bills.

Then about two years ago, my son in Texas started subscribing to a new, free e-mail service, Juno. Before long we at Mazza also joined, and that service today has probably over four million subscribers, paid for by ads, like network TV.

The Web also developed rapidly, and AOL, Erols, MSN, and many, many Internet providers rapidly improved their services and flat-rate billing became the established norm. Most of us now e-mail our family and friends almost daily, many are members of on-line groups, including of course SeniorNet on both AOL and the Web, and a colleague of mine asks: "How did we ever get along without it?"

Because of easy access to machines at SeniorNet, school, work, kids, etc., a relatively crowded apartment, and the unbelievably rapid changes in quality, capability, and prices, I never owned a PC, until this spring, when nearly six weeks of no access during our annual vacation made me suffer from withdrawal. On our last night in Delray Beach, Florida I became the proud owner of an IBM-Windows Laptop!

A week later, back home, I installed a modem, and it hasn't been quiet on-line since. The first week of getting on the Web, I averaged less than four hours sleep per night.

Using a generous grant from students Sy and Shirley Herman, JCA installed additional lines and AOL service to all our machines at the new Springhouse Manor Care Center in Bethesda, and in May, Joe Schneider started a Going On-Line class with twelve seniors, and as many of us colleagues as could fit in the room. Undoubtedly I will one day take my turn at teaching as I now do coaching.

That's the story in a rather large nutshell!

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